

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

OF

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FOR

REMOTE LEARNING SYSTEM

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention describes a system which permits an instructor to teach one or more students at a site remote from the instructor.

Description of the Related Art

Instruction of students located in the same physical classroom as the instructor is an effective method of teaching because it allows a student to ask questions to both the instructor and the rest of her classmates. The instructor can give an immediate answer to the students, and can spontaneously ask additional questions of the students as the lecture progresses. In short, the instructor and the students can easily interact with each other concerning the topic of the lecture.

However, it is often necessary or desirable to teach students who for some reason are not able to meet in the same physical classroom. For example, students or instructors located at disparate physical locations may not be able to meet in one location or the number of students may be so large as to preclude fitting comfortably into one classroom. In these situations, distant or remote learning systems can advantageously be employed.

One approach to teaching students at remote sites, disclosed in U.S. Patent 4,785,472, involves connecting a teaching station with a plurality of student stations over telephone lines. Both the teacher and the students have a prerecorded instructional

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tape and a video player to play the tape on. In operation, the instructor lectures, sends data to a computer, and controls on/off synchronization of the video players with commands sent over the telephone lines. In this manner, the instructor is able to lecture and periodically visually illustrate the lecture by showing the same section of multiple, identical video tapes to all of the students. This approach to remote learning has significant limitations caused by a need for (1) a constant telephone connection to the teaching site; (2) video segments for each session; and (3) a prepared video tape that must be distributed to each student before the lesson begins. Each of these requirements for a conventional remote learning system has associated costs, the most significant of which may be the telephone connection that must be connected for the complete lesson.

Another conventional approach to remote learning is to use personal computers outfitted with a modem such that all communication is over public telephone lines. This approach is initially advantageous because the setup cost is low; once in use, however, the phone connect time charges can be prohibitively expensive.

Additionally, it is presently difficult to send video signals with the limited bandwidth available with today's telephone lines and modems. Further, proposals to use wide bandwidth telephone lines for such video transmission will increase further the costs required to use such proposed systems.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is therefore an object of the present invention to address the limitations of the prior art remote learning systems. It is a further object of the present invention to provide a remote educational system that provides a visual and, when appropriate, audio presentation, for students, including, for example, pictures of the instructor while allowing the students to easily interact with the instructor and with each other.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide a remote educational system that is low in cost for the student, both in terms of the initial hardware and software required and in the day-to-day operation.

The advantages and purpose of the invention will be set forth in part in the description which follows, and in part will be obvious from the description, or may be learned by practice of the invention. The advantages and purpose of the invention will be realized and attained by means of the elements and combinations particularly pointed out in the appended claims.

To attain the advantages and in accordance with the purpose of the invention, as embodied and broadly described herein, the invention comprises a system for remote communication between a host and a client, comprising a host facility for integrating data to be supplied to the client into vertical blanking intervals of a television signal and broadcasting the integrated television signal. A client receives the broadcasted integrated

television signal and separates the integrated television signal into a standard television signal and the to-be-supplied data. Finally, the client transmits information to the host facility by connecting to a network linked with the host facility.

It is to be understood that both the foregoing general description and the following detailed description are exemplary and explanatory only and are not restrictive of the invention, as claimed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate an embodiment of the invention and together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. In the drawings,

Fig. 1 is an illustration of the distance learning system according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 2 is a block diagram of an exemplary multimedia PC as used in an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3 is a diagram illustrating the integration of the display data and presentation data according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 4 is an exemplary display of the user interface presented by the software according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 5 illustrates one of the multimedia PCs used in an embodiment of the present invention; and

Figs. 6A and 6B are a flow chart illustrating the system operation according to an embodiment of the present invention.

Reference will now be made in detail to the present preferred embodiment of the invention, an example of which is illustrated in the accompanying drawings. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers will be used throughout the drawings to refer to the same or like parts.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

A remote, or distance learning system is disclosed which combines on-line service information with a television signal designed to be received by students using a multimedia personal computer. Each personal computer is capable of communicating back to a server over a network, such as a public telephone network. The broadcasting facility then integrates the information transmitted over the network from a single student with the television signal, such that all the personal computer users (e.g., students) can see the information without having to connect to the network. The server may also integrate information originating at the server for transmittal to the students' personal computers.

In Fig. 1, the distance learning system (DLS) 100 according to the preferred embodiment comprises a broadcasting antenna 102 for broadcasting information, such as an instructional presentation, to a plurality of multimedia personal computers

(PCs) 106 located at sites distant from the antenna 102. The antenna 102 could equivalently be replaced by a cable television link. A broadcasting facility 110, and server 104 are coupled to the antenna 102 and generate the signals to be broadcast by the antenna 102. A network 108, such as a public telephone network, is used to transmit data between the PCs 106 and the server 104. Although in the preferred embodiment the network 108 is a public telephone network, it could equivalently be any wide area network or combination thereof.

Reference will now be made to Fig. 2 to describe an exemplary embodiment of one of the PCs 106. Television tuner card/vertical blanking interval (VBI) modem 208 receives the television signal transmitted from the antenna 102. The television tuner card/VBI modem 208 may preferably be any of a number of suitable commercially available products, such as, for example, the Malachi, manufactured by En Technology Corporation. The television signal received at the tuner card/VBI modem 208 is provided to the on-line operating module 212 as presentation data and display data. Presentation data is the real-time audio-video data recorded by the instructor whereas display data is data that, for example, defines actions of the students. The on-line operating module 212 controls a modem 210 and display area 216 of the PC's monitor 214. Further, the on-line operating module 212 manages information input from the user of PC 106 using input devices such as a mouse, a pen writing tablet, or a keyboard.

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Fig. 5 illustrates an exemplary one of the multimedia PCs 106. In the preferred embodiment, PC 106 is a multimedia personal computer operating with the 80X86 compatible architecture and a graphical or windows based operating system. However, as would be recognized by one of ordinary skill in the art, many other suitable computer architectures and operating systems could be equivalently used.

PC housing 500 of PC 106 holds the majority of the PC's operating hardware. Housing 500 may hold, for example, the main processor, a hard disk drive, a floppy disk drive, fast access volatile memory, and CD ROM drive. Either connected to or integrated within housing 500 are a variety of input devices such as keyboard 506, mouse 502, and touch pad or pen writing tablet 504. PC 106 may also include speakers 508 and monitor 214, used to output audio and visual information, respectively. Modem 210, for sending or receiving digital data over phone lines, is electrically connected to housing 500. Television tuner/VBI modem 208, for receiving a modified standard television signal, is also electrically connected to housing 500. Both modem 210 and tuner/VBI modem 208 may alternately be implemented as computer (or printed circuit) boards installed within the housing 500.

The invention will be further clarified by the following operational description, which is intended to be exemplary of the invention. In a typical remote learning session according to the present invention, an instructor, located at the host site 112,

teaches students, each located at one of the PCs 106. The lecture information in the form of an audio-visual feed from the instructor, called presentation data, is broadcast through a television signal by antenna 102 to the PCs 106. In addition to the presentation data, data to be used to control the on-line operating module 212, called display data, is embedded within the television signal being broadcast to the PCs 106. Frequently, the display data describes updates to be made to the students' displays.

Fig. 3 illustrates the integration function of the presentation data with the display data, performed at the host 112. Presentation data to be integrated may include a live or taped audio-visual feed of the lecture. Display data to be integrated may include data entered by either the instructor or one of the students. Display data entered by a student is transmitted to the host 112 through network 108 using the student's modem 210 before it is integrated. The actual integration operation is performed by integrator 300, which receives the display data and presentation data and integrates them into a single output signal 302. The output signal 302 comprises a standard television signal of the presentation data modified by inserting the display data into the television signal's vertical blanking intervals. The output signal 302 is transmitted to the broadcasting facility 110 and antenna 102 for broadcasting to the PCs 106.

All the display data at the server does not have to be integrated by the integrator 300. Optionally, if the server is to send data to only one, or only a few students, and a live modem connection exists between those students, the server may send the display data directly over the live modem connection.

At each PC 106, tuner card/VBI modem 208 receives the transmitted output signal 302 and reads the display data from the vertical blanking interval of the television signal. The separated presentation and display data signals are then transferred to the on-line operating module 212.

The on-line operating module 212 manages the user interface 216 and transfers the output display data over modem 210 to server 104 via network 108. A typical display on the user interface 216 is shown in more detail in Fig. 4. The operation of the on-line operating module 212 in relation to Fig. 4 will be described next.

Fig. 4 is an exemplary display of the interface screen presented by the on-line operating module 212 to the user. A similar interface screen would be presented to the instructor at the host 112. The three main sections of the interface screen are the instructor presentation section 400, the chalkboard section 402, and the typing/bulletin board section 404.

In the instructor presentation section 400, a real-time rendering of the television presentation data is displayed. Typically, this would be a display of the instructor and/or his instructional materials during a lecture. An audio signal

corresponding to the instructor's presentation may be simultaneously output to the speakers 508. The chalkboard section 402 is an interactive chalkboard that can be written on by either the instructor or the students. Typically, a computer mouse, touch pad, and/or pen writing pad is used to write on the chalkboard 402. Information written on the chalkboard 402 by the instructor is integrated into the television signal as display data at the host 212, by the integrator 300, and transmitted to the PCs 106, where it is subsequently separated by the tuner card/VBI modem 208 from the television signal and displayed on the students' chalkboards 402.

A flow chart of the decision sequence initiated when a student writes information to her chalkboard 402 for viewing by the instructor and the other students is shown in Fig. 6. When information is written on the chalkboard by the student, step 600, it is transmitted as display data by the student's modem 210 to the server 104 in step 606. If in step 602 it is determined that the modem is not connected to the public telephone network, step 604 is executed, connecting the modem 210 to the network. If a predetermined period of time elapses with no transmission by the modem and the software is in a "toll-saving" mode, modem 210 will automatically be disconnected from the telephone network. In the "toll-saving" mode, connections to the server are temporary and end after a predetermined period of time. If a connection has been ended and the student subsequently performs

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actions which require connection to the server, the client program transparently re-establishes the connection.

In step 608, the display data received by the server is written onto the server chalkboard. Next, the display data is integrated with the instructor television signal, step 610, and the integrated output signal 302 is broadcast, step 612. The integrated output signal 302 is then received at the students' PCs, step 614, and separated by the tuner/VBI modem 512 in step 616. The separated display data is received by the on-line operating module 212. Finally, the on-line operating module 212 judges whether the display data is the same display data that was previously entered and transmitted from the host PC. If it is not the same display data, the chalkboard 402 is updated with this new display data in step 620. If it is the same display data, the chalkboard 402 is not updated.

Although the above example was illustrated using a general broadcast of the display data, that is, the display data was received and displayed on all the PCs 106, more selective broadcasting functions can be utilized. In particular, the student or instructor writing on the chalkboard may elect for her message to be displayed on only a selected set of the other PCs. To do this, the user selects, preferably using a menu system, whom her message is to be sent to. This selection information is transmitted with the display data. At the receiving PC, an additional judgment is made at step 619, namely, the PC determines whether the message was addressed for display to that

particular user. If it is determined that it was intended for that user, the message is displayed, otherwise, the message is ignored by the on-line operating module 212.

Typing/bulletin board section 216 of the user interface is used by the students and the instructor as an interactive "chat" area in which messages can be quickly typed and transmitted to other users. Here, after a line of text 406 is entered by a student or the instructor, it is converted into display data by the on-line operating module 212 and transmitted to the other users in the same manner that information entered on the chalkboard is transmitted. That is, the text is transmitted to the host 112, integrated into the television signal by the integrator 300, and broadcast to the PCs 106. Similar to the chalkboard information, a user may also address the messages sent to a limited set of users, allowing for more personal messages.

It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications and variations can be made in the embodiment of the present invention and in construction of this invention without departing from the scope or spirit of the invention. As an example, the disclosed invention is not limited to remote classroom instruction with an instructor lecturing to students. Indeed, a bulletin board and on-line service has been constructed using the concepts disclosed in the present invention. The bulletin board and on-line service transmits most of the general bulletin board data to the users using a high bandwidth, low reception cost signal such as a television signal. The users

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transmit their data using a lower bandwidth network such a public telephone network. Although all the users receive a single transmission signal from the bulletin board, the user's local software only displays the information intended for that user.

Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from consideration of the specification and practice of the invention disclosed herein. It is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only, with the true scope and spirit of the invention being indicated by the following claims.

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